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# THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

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## CATHEDRAL MUSIC AND COMPOSERS.

No. VI.

Contributed by E. HOLMES, Author of the "Life of Mozart."

OF John Blow, the last of the triumvirate who prepared the way for Purcell, it is now time to speak. If his natural genius were cast in a mould somewhat narrower than that of Humphreys or Wise, his longer life and unremitting industry enabled him to display it to greater advantage, and to attain a higher position than either; while in his personal fortune he must be pronounced the happiest of the three.

He was the first of the young persons bred up in the duties of Cathedral organist amidst the licentious manners of the Restoration, who filled that monastic office free from scandal and unimpeachable in conduct. The impression raised by the benevolence and dignity of his character was aided by a very comely and agreeable presence; and with his known accomplishments and ardour in music, he became surrounded by troops of friends and partisans, who, when he died, would have placed him in almost the same rank as Purcell. If the one was the British Orpheus, the other must at least be the Amphion of England.

With regard to the secular productions of Blow, which were published in 1700, in one folio volume, under the title *Amphion Anglicanus*, Burney has the following remarks:—

Whether Dr. Blow was stimulated to this publication by emulation, envy, or the solicitation of his scholars and friends, by whom there are no less than fifteen encomiastic copies of verses prefixed to the work, the ungrateful public seems to have remained always insensible to these strains of the modern *Amphion*, which were not only incapable of building cities, but even of supporting his own tottering fame.

The worthy historian, when he was penning these sneers at one who passed his whole life in the unwearied service of music—trying to elevate it by the pursuit of the new and uncommon, and leaving to posterity to realize what he indicated but imperfectly—little thought that a time would come when his own critical opinions would be reviewed with small honor. It was sufficient that Blow, as a composer, was quite superannuated in the age of Burney, to encourage our historian in the splenetic remarks of which he has singled him out as the peculiar object; in retaliation, no doubt, for his harsh combinations—the major third and minor sixth, &c. But with respect to the future of music, Burney appears to possess as contracted a vision as a mole. He does not distinguish between music whose interest is sus-

pended by a temporary fashion, and which will be cast up again by the waves of time, and that which is thoroughly dead and forgotten through its innate weakness and emptiness.

The greater part of Handel's opera airs have long departed to the same limbo as the songs of Dr. Blow, for the mutations of fashion and taste remove good as well as bad things from sight and hearing. But we generally meet the best of them again. If they are not exactly what we now prefer to play or sing, it is pleasant to read them, and to be able to say of the composer—'This man worked well with the materials of his day; he meant well, and is a true patriarch of the great family of composers who in all ages are united in one design, and speak the same mystic language.' In reviewing the past, we find many names disclosed of men, who, though they never enjoy a great position in the immortal scroll of fame—for fortune has always her share in this—have yet contributed to the advance of music equally with the greatest composers; and it gives a healthful stimulus to our sense of justice occasionally to turn over and examine old opinions and prejudices.

That Burney was a man without malice, scholarly and cultivated, as well as of excellent authority in some matters, makes the reader endure much from him, which he cannot at the same time but confess has been set down too lightly. His admission that in one of his tours he had recorded certain opinions upon hearsay, gives a favorable idea of his candour; and his inclination for humour and pleasantry renders him an agreeable companion. But what shall we say of a musician, who, travelling in Germany, and hearing the finest organists, found nothing so remarkable to observe in them as how they *perspired* after playing. A Dutch psalm three hours long without stopping, and M. Pothoff, the organist, carried off to bed and wrapped in blankets after his performance on the *carillons*, were incidents which shook the Doctor's sides with unfeigned merriment, and he imparts these things with zest to his readers. He is equally rich in describing his own ludicrous travelling distresses;—as, for instance, when in a night-storm on the Danube, where he is left alone on the raft, he attempts to keep the roaring wind and rain out of his hut by pinning his pocket-handkerchief at the open window. That he is able to recall with a laugh so desolate and really dangerous a situation, is one of many circumstances that render Burney personally liked.

Still, when he comes to speak of the art which filled the entire span of his professional existence, it will be observed that he seldom rises into enthusiasm, except it be on the voice and tone of a singer, or the brilliant finger of a harpsichord player.

It is impossible that he could have heard much

of the higher compositions of which he treats. When he remarks upon a little madrigal by Gastoldi, that "the chord of F natural immediately succeeding the chord of G is too unrelative and sudden for modern ears," he overlooks the whole genius of the madrigal style, which delights in such piquant progressions, and dallies with the enjoyment and effect of what is forbidden in consecutive fifths and octaves, by carefully avoiding them in the counterpoint. We give Burney the full credit of not concealing his aversions; but why, if he were a good musician, should he ever have entertained them? His ears could not have been thoroughly trained.

The combination of the major third and minor sixth, for which he particularly censures Dr. Blow, has the authority of Purcell and of Handel; it had been employed before by Dowland; and it is still good in the works of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. Burney observes that neither Purcell nor Handel rendered this harmony *popular*—the plain reason of which is that the highest things in music are only for the initiated. The ear must be educated, or it will never get beyond that of Dr. Burney.

However, it is to a writer who confessedly could not enjoy many things countenanced in the highest quarters, and now widely approved by musicians, that we may chiefly attribute the unfavorable prepossessions of which Blow has long been the subject, and that he has received far less than his full share of praise, as a discoverer and early labourer in the rude field of melody and expression. For many years even in the present century the public has obediently received the dicta of criticism without examination; but the age in which individual prejudices could pass thus sanctioned into authority is entirely altered by the great diffusion of church music, and the enlarged capacity of individuals to compare and judge for themselves. So just is time, and so favorable to the truth, that the very pages in which Burney sought to exhibit in Blow an example to all posterity of a man who "threw about notes at random, and insulted the ear with lawless discords, which no concords can render tolerable"—pass their own encomium on the musician of the Restoration, and show how feeble a harmonist was his critic. What are we to think of the Doctor in Music who could introduce such an extract as the following, with the exclamation, "*Here we are lost*:"—

and for-give me all . . my

sins, and for-give me all . . my sins.

Why should any one be lost, much less a dignitary of the art, in so harmless, intelligible, and appropriate a passage? Even in the manner of writing the melody, with its little anticipating notes of the accompanying harmony, we see the early effort to polish and refine the captivating vocal art; and certainly, as we owe something to every one who hastened this consummation, Blow must not be defrauded of his due acknowledgment. If two sevenths, following in a cadence, remind us of Handel, in the habits of the composers of the Restoration, still more are we reminded of him in the imploring and pathetic style in which they set the plaintive words of the Psalms. That Handel had diligently listened to them, we have the evidence of his cotemporaries; that he modelled upon them such prayers as "Vouchsafe, O Lord," in the *Dettingen Te Deum*, is certain; and thus English composers have had their influence on Handel's world-wide fame. In pursuing this theme we have not the least desire to pluck a single laurel from the tomb of the illustrious German; but there is a pleasure in doing justice to the pioneers of the art, and especially to the English school of the Restoration—a school which, though it profitted much from Italy, brought a fund of original invention to music not less honorable and advantageous to it than the great writers of the Elizabethan era had before done to the sister art of poetry.

Burney appears, in his sheet of Blow's transgressions, chiefly in the not very dignified character of a fifth catcher: but even in this department of criticism he is open to the objection of wrong principles. He applies his compasses wherever he sees consecutive fifths on paper, without excepting passing and grace notes, which have always been allowed free warrant. He had no notion that consecutive perfect fifths *may* be delightful, and would not have spared Beethoven for this bar in the "Andante" of his *Fifth Quartett*:—

1st & 2nd VIOLIN.

TENOR and BASS.

and for-give me all . . my

in which it is quite evident that Beethoven might have avoided the fifths if he had chosen to retain

the D in the bass, with which he commenced the bar. But then his melody would not have been so good. Occasions may also be found where ascending sevenths are permissible; indeed, the latest canon of the art is, that everything is permitted provided the ear of good taste be not offended. Mozart somewhere speaks of rules as only binding on composers *while they knew nothing better*. He himself thus opened the gate, and gave full authority for all that has been so well accomplished since his time.

But it is not our wish to exult over the blemishes of a writer for whom we have a personal regard, merely because we have lived some forty years later, and have witnessed and enjoyed the splendid musical heresies of the 19th century. Burney was the man of his time, as Blow was of his; and the same toleration must be conceded to him, or we shall scarcely profit by his example. However, when he made Blow's "crudities" pay the penalty of all the harmonic offences of Purcell, Wise, and Humphreys, for they all share in them, he did what was unusual in so candid and good-natured a man, and seems himself to have written under the influence of indigestion, spleen, or nightmare.

We want not the citations of our historian to prove to us that his criticism of composition was inclined rather to the literal than spiritual; a hundred passages in his writings tend to show that music of the highest class did not make that profound impression upon him which it does on a true devotee of the art. He survived many changes of taste, and believed that the art would remain for ever in this perpetual state of fluctuation. So it may with respect to the theatres and the opera-going public, where all is flash and excitement; but, in the inner world of good music, when we revolve in ourselves the multitude of things which time has turned up, it is as impossible to conceive the decay of some of them as it is to imagine our senses palled with the fresh air of the country, or weary of the golden clouds of an evening landscape. When will Bach and Handel's fugues cease to please? or, when Mozart, or Haydn, or Beethoven's quartets, with some *few* other things? That will certainly not be any time next year—nor can we in truth tell whenever it will be.

It will be proper to close this paper with some opinions which may serve as antidotes to the injurious ones disseminated by Burney in regard to Dr. Blow, who must not remain a martyr to his taste and enthusiasm, and suffer for all the good he designed and intended, as well as what he accomplished.

Boyce has distinguished him for "his success in cultivating an uncommon talent for modulation," and given him other commendations. Burney cannot but grant that he has courage,

taste, and feeling in the expression of his text. But the best testimony to the powers of this great cathedral musician will be found in his works themselves. He wrote both in the dramatic and choral styles of the church with equal success. His changes of harmony have great amplitude and grandeur, and he seems to have been the inventor of a variety of pleasing and melodious closes. As with Purcell, the progressions of Blow are new and unexpected; yet there is a certain air of nature in them which shows the product, not of labour, but of an original mind. That he could write excellent smooth counterpoint, in the pure ecclesiastical style, the anthem "My God, look upon me" is a sufficient proof. He was not, therefore, always "straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps." And, amid the scattered beauties of his fine Services, we shall always recollect with pleasure the verse "And was crucified," from the Creed of that in E minor. Indeed, the more we look into the compositions of this master the more we find him the worthy musical associate of Henry Purcell, and the befitting preceptor of such pupils as Croft and Jeremiah Clark.

(To be continued.)

#### GLoucester Musical Festival.

The celebration of the present Festival has proved in every respect unusually successful. This result will be hailed with satisfaction by every friend of the art; but more particularly by those who feel an interest in the time-honored music meetings of the three choirs, which we hope have now survived the critical period of their existence, since railroads, with their rapid transit of audiences, have as much changed the face of musical matters in the country as in London. Now that so many of our principal cities are brought within a short two or three hours' ride, a great deal of the country becomes virtually London, for the purposes of concert-giving; and we trust that the new audiences which this state of things must command, will put an end to the annual mulct imposed on the stewards of the choir meetings, and re-establish them on a firm basis, without further trial of the generosity and liberality of the country gentry, which have been so long and so nobly exerted in their favor.

The morning music at the Cathedral took place on September 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th, commencing with the usual Service and Selection on the Tuesday, in which, however, Handel's Jubilate in D was, we believe, an unwonted feature; on Wednesday followed Mendelssohn's *Elijah*; on Thursday, selections from Haydn's *Creation*, Beethoven's Service in C, with Mendelssohn's *Lauda Sion*, and a miscellaneous Part; and on Friday the *Messiah* wound up the sacred performances.

The list of the principal vocalists comprised Madame Sontag, Madame Castellan, Miss Lucombe, Miss Dolby, Miss Williams, Mr. Sims Reeves, Mr. Lockey, Mr. H. Phillips, Mr. Lawler, and Herr Formes. Among the chief instrumentalists in the band were—Leader, Mr. H. Blagrove; Messrs. Willy, Hill,